

Record of Decision
USDA Forest Service

Gila National Forest
Land and Resource Management Plan
Environmental Impact Statement

Catron, Sierra, Grant and Hidalgo Counties, New Mexico

INTRODUCTION

This Record of Decision documents my decision approving a land and resource management plan for the Gila National Forest for the next 10 to 15 years. The Forest Plan will normally be revised in 10 years but must be revised in 15 years. Revision means the entire planning process will be repeated and a completely new plan will be prepared.

This Record of Decision describes alternatives considered and rationale for the selected alternative. The environmentally preferred alternative and the most economically efficient alternative are identified. Mitigation and monitoring measures, implementation procedures, appeal rights and the Lower San Francisco and Hells Hole Wilderness Study Area recommendations are described.

DECISION

I have selected the Proposed Action Alternative for management of the Gila National Forest for the next 10 to 15 years.

When compared to present management plans, the Forest Plan will:

- Place more emphasis on wildlife, recreation, watershed, and range resources.
- Sell timber from fewer steep slope areas.
- Reduce development of unroaded areas by 60 percent.
- Accelerate balancing permitted livestock with grazing capacity by improving rangeland conditions, increasing livestock carrying capacity and sustaining a higher percentage of existing permitted livestock.
- Have a more economic 10-year timber sale schedule. The average annual allowable sale quantity is 30.5 million board feet (including .5 million board feet of products). About 41 million board feet per year have been offered for sale during the last 10-15 years. However, the average volume sold has been approximately 30 million board feet. Offering a volume closer to the volume historically sold will increase the efficiency of the timber sale program.

- Have 40 percent fewer new roads. Emphasis is placed on utilizing existing roads.
- Obliterate 80 miles of unneeded roads each year.
- Provide a higher level of maintenance of developed recreation sites.
- Construct 12 trailheads.
- Provide a higher level of trail maintenance and reconstruction or construction of approximately 10 miles of trails per year.
- Nominate 2-4 cultural resource properties to the National Historic Register. Rehabilitate two sites and complete 1,500 to 3,000 acres of nonproject cultural resource inventory each year.
- Improve wilderness management by expanding wilderness volunteer programs, law enforcement, trail maintenance, sign replacement and public education contacts.
- Manage 678,000 unroaded acres to maintain their existing semi-primitive recreation opportunities and allow these areas to be considered for all uses, including wilderness, when the plan is revised.
- Sustain forage capacity through maintenance of highly productive revegetation areas.
- Accelerate improvement of Forest-wide watershed conditions.
- Survey and accelerate improvement of riparian conditions.
- Designate potential research natural areas.
- Increase emphasis on conservation of State and Federal threatened, endangered, and sensitive species by managing their habitats to permit removal of these species from the threatened and endangered lists.

This alternative will provide quality on-the-ground resource management, protection, and public service on the Gila National Forest. Selection of an alternative which emphasizes improvement of recreation opportunities, wildlife habitats, and watershed conditions, while maintaining a viable timber sales program, is appropriate and balanced.

The Forest Plan provides management direction for the Gila National Forest for the next 10-15 years. Direction is provided through goals, objectives, multiple-use prescriptions, and standards and guidelines. The Forest Plan contains sufficient detail to plan and carry out program level decisions. Additional environmental analysis will be done on site specific project proposals. No decisions for use of land or resources beyond the 10-15 year life of the Plan have been made. The Plan does not address administrative operations such as personnel matters, purchasing, or organizational changes.

Wilderness Study Areas; Inventoried Potential Wild and Scenic Rivers

The Lower San Francisco River Wilderness Study Area (8,800 acres) and the Hells Hole Wilderness Study Area (18,860 acres) were evaluated for wilderness suitability as directed by Congress in Public Law 96-550. The selected alternative recommends that these areas be designated nonwilderness. These areas will be managed to maintain their existing wilderness character until Congress acts on the recommendation.

The Hells Hole Wilderness Study area was originally part of a larger RARE II area that extended into Arizona. The Arizona portion contained an ecosystem that was under-represented in the Wilderness System. As a result, the entire area was designated a Further Planning Area in the RARE II process. When the New Mexico Wilderness Bill (Public Law 96-550) was passed the area was designated a Wilderness Study Area. Since that time, the Arizona Wilderness Bill released the Arizona portion for other multiple uses. Since this was the portion that contained the under-represented ecosystem and since existing wilderness on the Gila already contains vegetation similar to the New Mexico portion of Hells Hole Wilderness Study Area, wilderness designation of the area would not contribute significant ecological diversity to the Wilderness System.

In addition, the present and expected use of this area is low. Similar areas in the Gila Wilderness, the Blue Range Wilderness, and the Aldo Leopold Wilderness receive very light use. Existing wilderness areas can provide for increased wilderness recreation in this type of environment.

The Lower San Francisco River Wilderness Study Area was also designated a Wilderness Study Area by the New Mexico Wilderness Bill. This area has been accessed by vehicles for recreational purposes for many years. Forest Service personnel have repeatedly reviewed the effects of this use and have not found unacceptable resource damage. In recent years vehicles have been used by 60 to 85 percent of the recreationists using the canyon.

The majority of this use occurs near the confluence of Big Dry Creek and the San Francisco River. This is the only area where this type of environment can be accessed by vehicles. As a result, it provides a unique motorized recreation opportunity. This use of the canyon, along with the fact that the existing wildernesses on the Forest can provide for the expected wilderness recreation are the reasons for the nonwilderness recommendation.

The San Francisco and Gila Rivers have been identified in the National Park Service Nationwide River Inventory as potential candidates for Wild and Scenic Rivers. No segments of these rivers are recommended for classification.

The eligible portions of the San Francisco and Gila Rivers were evaluated to see if they possessed the outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreation, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural, or other similar values as identified in Section 1(b) of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

Based on the evaluation criteria, the eligible portions of the Gila and San Francisco Rivers do not contain outstandingly remarkable characteristics that are required for designation under the authority of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act or are already protected in wilderness.

These recommendations will receive further review by the Chief of the Forest Service, the Secretary of Agriculture, and the President of the United States. Final decisions on wilderness and wild and scenic river designations are the responsibility of Congress. A legislative Environmental Impact Statement addressing these recommendations will be prepared by the Forest Service and forwarded to Congress. These recommendations are excluded from appeal as per 36 CFR 211.18(b)(3).

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

Other alternatives considered in detail were:

Alternative A - No Action Alternative

Evaluates the effects of continuing current resource management. This is the No Action Alternative required by the National Environmental Policy Act regulations.

Alternative B

Strives to meet Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act (RPA) objectives assigned in the Regional Guide.

Alternative C

Emphasizes resource outputs having market benefit values, with a higher emphasis on livestock forage production.

Alternative D

Emphasizes resource outputs having market benefit values, with a higher emphasis on timber production.

Alternative E

Emphasizes improvement of the range resource and resolution of conflicts between livestock grazing and wildlife. Wilderness Study Areas are recommended for wilderness designation.

Alternative F

Stresses resources such as wildlife habitat, wildlife recreation use, dispersed and developed recreation, wilderness, Wild and Scenic Rivers, and watershed. Wilderness Study Areas and inventoried potential Wild and Scenic Rivers are recommended for classification.

Alternatives Considered, But Eliminated From Detailed Study

A number of alternatives were considered but eliminated from detailed study. Some were developed to determine effects of constraints and interrelationships of resource users. Others determined the capacity to produce individual resources.

These alternatives and the reasons for eliminating them from detailed study are discussed in Chapter 2 of the Environmental Impact Statement.

REASONS FOR DECISION

My decision is based on evaluation of which alternative provides quality on-the-ground resource management, protection, and public service while maximizing net public benefits. Net public benefits are the long-term benefits less costs and are measured by both quantitative and qualitative criteria rather than a single measure or index.

Net public benefits and the quality of on-the-ground management were determined by evaluating how well each alternative responded to issues, by weighing environmental consequences as disclosed in the environmental impact statement, by assessing budget requirements, and by considering public comments.

The Proposed Action Alternative is selected because it provides the highest level of issue resolution in an economically efficient manner while providing for a high level of environmental quality. Therefore, it maximizes net public benefits.

Issue Resolution

Although all alternatives provide multiple use benefits while protecting or enhancing environmental quality, issues are treated differently in each alternative and each

alternative resulted in varying degrees of issue resolution.

While the selected alternative does not provide the highest resolution of many individual issues, it provides the highest overall resolution of the most issues. For example:

- Alternative D provides the highest level of timber production. To sustain this level, the largest number of steep slope acres would need to be logged and the largest number of unroaded acres would eventually be developed. Alternative D would also provide for low resolution of wildlife and riparian issues and the lowest improvement in soil loss and the second to the lowest improvement in watershed condition acres.
- Alternative C provides for the highest level of domestic livestock grazing, but resolution of the wildlife and riparian issues would be low. This alternative would result in the second to the lowest improvement in soil loss and the third to the lowest improvement in watershed condition acres.
- Alternative F provides for the highest level of resolution of the wildlife and riparian issues. Reduction of soil loss would be the highest and acres in satisfactory watershed condition would be the highest. Alternative F however, responds poorly to the need to maintain community stability through the maintenance of a viable timber and livestock industry.

In contrast to the above examples of alternatives that rank the highest in resolution of individual issues and low in the resolution of others, the selected alternative ranks high in the resolution of all issues. For example it will:

- Provide sawtimber equivalent to that sold over the last 10 to 15 years providing stability of local timber dependent communities. Only 3 percent of the presently unroaded area is affected. Fuelwood production is sustained at a high level.
- Contribute to the resolution of the range issue by continuing the trend of improving the range resource. Grazing capacity will generally be increased. While some reduction in permitted livestock is likely in some locations due to range condition, a viable livestock industry will be maintained.
- Provide for a high resolution of the landownership issue. Base-in-exchange lands are provided adjacent to communities surrounded by National Forest lands and rights-of-ways will be acquired where needed to support resource management goals.

- Provide dispersed recreation opportunities above the demand. Semi-primitive recreation opportunities will remain high. Most existing dispersed recreation facilities will be maintained.
- Provide a moderate increase in wildlife habitat diversity and carrying capacity increasing wildlife recreation opportunities. Significant progress will be made toward having all riparian areas in satisfactory or better condition.
- Result in the least number of road miles maintained below standard.
- Reduce soil loss and improve watershed condition.

Most Economically Efficient Alternative

The selected alternative ranks third in present net value (PNV) which is the primary economic criteria for comparing alternatives. PNV is the difference between the discounted value of all outputs having a monetary value and total discounted management costs. Alternatives having higher PNV were Alternatives F and E.

The difference in PNV between the Proposed Action Alternative and the higher alternatives is primarily due to differences in wildlife recreation outputs which provide the greatest contribution to PNV on the Gila. The alternatives having higher PNV achieve increased wildlife outputs by reducing investments in other resource activities and increasing investments in wildlife habitat management. This results in lower resolution of issues relating to the production of timber, livestock forage, and the maintenance of community stability.

Alternative F is the economically preferable alternative. However, because of its lower resolution of issues, the Proposed Action Alternative was selected.

Environmentally Preferred Alternative

Alternative F provides the greatest opportunity for primitive recreation, maintains the most natural appearing environment, provides highest level of wildlife habitat diversity and carrying capacity, and improves watershed and riparian condition. Therefore, Alternative F is the environmentally preferable alternative.

Alternative F, however, provides lower resolution of the issues relating to the production of timber and livestock forage, and the maintenance of community stability. The Proposed Action Alternative was selected because of its overall higher resolution of issues and because it provides a high level of environmental quality. The selected alternative is close to Alternative F in its effects on reducing soil loss and improving watershed condition.

RESPONSE TO PUBLIC COMMENTS

To improve the Forest Plan, the public was intensively involved in review of the draft Forest Plan and Environmental Impact Statement. Information meetings were held with a variety of interest groups and representatives. Over 190 people attended meetings. In addition, 277 written comments were received. Public comments resulted in the following changes in the draft Forest Plan:

- Average annual allowable timber sale quantity was reduced from 35 to 30.5 million board feet which is equivalent to the average volume sold from the Forest for the last 10 to 15 years.
- Acres suitable for timber production were reduced from 421,994 acres (98 percent of tentatively suitable timber) to 272,174 acres (62 percent of the tentatively suitable timber). Eight percent of the total Forest area will be managed to sustain the Forest's allowable sale quantity.
- Timber to be sold from steep slope areas was reduced by 41 percent.
- Development in unroaded areas was reduced by 42 percent. Only 3 percent of the existing unroaded acres will be developed.
- New road construction was reduced by 17 percent.
- Open road density was decreased.
- Soil loss from timber sales will be reduced by about 40 percent.
- Reduction in road construction and higher road maintenance will reduce soil loss due to roads by about one-third.
- The portion of the Lower San Francisco River Wilderness Study Area below Mule Creek will be closed to vehicle use all year and the portion above Mule Creek will be open all year. This will help resolve the conflict between motorized and nonmotorized use of the area.
- Trail maintenance was increased.
- Management emphasis descriptions and standards and guidelines were re-written to clarify grazing management direction. Sections of the Environmental Impact Statement were re-written to clarify the existing grazing situation and environmental consequences of grazing.
- Wildlife coordination was increased on the suitable timber lands.
- The acres managed for old growth were increased from about 15 percent of the mixed conifer and ponderosa pine to about 20 percent.

- The emphasis on improving riparian habitat was increased. Standards and guidelines were added to clarify management direction and to set inventory and condition goals.
- Uneven age timber management areas were identified.
- The monitoring section was revised and clarified.
- Additional Cultural Resource Standards and Guidelines were added.

Numerous other suggestions and technical corrections were incorporated into the final Environmental Impact Statement and Forest Plan. Detailed documentation can be found in the response document which accompanies the final Environmental Impact Statement.

MITIGATION

The following mitigation requirements for maintenance and enhancement of environmental quality are incorporated into the standards and guidelines in the Forest Plan:

- Priority will be given to balancing permitted grazing use with forage capacity. This will be accomplished cooperatively through increasing livestock capacity and adjusting permitted numbers.
- Recreation opportunities are provided with levels of service appropriate to the type and extent of use expected. Standards and guidelines will maintain or improve condition of air, soil, water, vegetation, and wildlife resources.
- Visual quality is provided through the visual resource management objectives. Additional standards and guidelines provide direction to maintain or enhance visual quality as an integral part of other activities.
- Areas needing protection from motorized vehicle use are identified and appropriate management direction will be applied. If motorized vehicle use in specific areas results in unacceptable resource damage, they will be closed to motorized use.
- Management and protection of cultural resources is assured through standards and guidelines that provide compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act and for coordination with State historic preservation planning. Provisions are made for site protection, National Historic Register nominations, and interpretation of cultural resources.

- Improved wildlife habitat will be achieved through integration with other resource activities and direct habitat improvements. Management Indicator species will be monitored to insure that desired future condition of wildlife habitats is achieved. Habitats for State and Federally listed threatened, endangered, and sensitive species will be managed with the objective to remove these species from their respective listings.

- The following wildlife needs are provided through standards and guidelines: diversity; old growth stands; snags; big game cover on both summer and winter ranges; big game winter range; big game birthing; raptor nest buffers; turkey roost trees; squirrel nest trees; spotted owl habitat; edge contrast; down/dead logs; protection of total areas; wildlife forage allocation; roads open to the public, and active logging periods.

- Insect and disease conditions will be monitored on a continuing basis. Integrated forest protection methods will be used for prevention and control of insects and diseases as appropriate.

- Watershed protection and enhancement are provided for through "Best Management Practice" standards and guidelines, and cooperative balancing of livestock grazing use with capacity.

- Minerals and oil and gas activities will be managed through plans of operation to insure environmental and other resource needs are protected while developing these needed resources.

- Standards and guidelines for wilderness management provide for: a preservation visual quality objective; managing all uses within capacity; minimum impact no-trace use of wilderness; and using prescribed fire with planned and unplanned ignitions to meet wilderness objectives.

MONITORING

Implementation of the Forest Plan will be monitored as described in Chapter 5. The purposes of monitoring are to evaluate whether the Forest mission, goals and objectives are being realized and to determine how effectively management standards and guidelines have been applied. At specified intervals results will be evaluated. The results of monitoring and evaluation will measure progress of Plan implementation and will help determine when amendments or revisions are needed.

IMPLEMENTATION

Continued public participation will be encouraged during implementation. Environmental analyses of site specific projects and monitoring activities will provide opportunities for public participation. Watershed condition, riparian condition, range condition, timber sales, and wildlife habitat are expected to maintain a high level of public interest.

The allowable timber sale quantity averages 30.5 million board feet (MMBF) per year (30 MMBF of sawtimber and .5 MMBF of products). The allowable timber sale quantity is the maximum amount of timber that can be sold during the 10-year life of the Plan, but is shown as an average annual figure because most people are more familiar with annual sale volumes. Actual annual timber sales may fluctuate, but the 10-year total cannot be exceeded except for salvage or sanitation sales of timber stands which are substantially damaged by fire, windthrow, other catastrophe, or which are in imminent danger from insect or disease attack. Riparian timber stands and pure aspen stands will not be sold on a regular basis and have been excluded from lands suitable for timber production. However, occasional timber sales may be made in these areas if on-the-ground studies show that a timber sale activity is the proper tool to meet wildlife habitat or other objectives.

The environmental analyses conducted for specific timber sales will provide opportunities for all interested parties to participate. Individual sales will be evaluated based on expected costs and revenues and achievement of other multiple use objectives. Individual timber sales may be sold where projected costs exceed projected revenues when necessary to meet other multiple use objectives. Efforts will be made to reduce timber program costs through such measures as shared services, contracting, and implementing integrated stand management.

The budget for the Forest Plan is an estimated annual average budget for the 10-15 year life of the Plan. It is made up of broad averages and annual investment initiatives. Annual budget requests will be based on the Forest Plan. However, if appropriations are less than requested, modified rates of implementation and additional operating efficiencies will be examined so that planned on-the-ground results will be achieved. Individual projects will be evaluated based on expected costs and revenues and achievement of multiple use objectives prescribed in the Forest Plan. Individual projects may be implemented where projected costs exceed projected revenues when necessary to meet multiple use objectives as established by the direction in the Forest Plan.


The Forest Plan will become effective 30 days after the Notice of Availability of the Environmental Impact Statement and this Record of Decision appears in the Federal Register. The time needed

to bring all activities into compliance with the Forest Plan will vary. Most operation and maintenance activities, projects in the first year of development, new special use proposals, and transfers of existing permits can be brought into compliance with the Forest Plan the first year of implementation. Existing projects as well as contractual obligations will continue as planned. As soon as practicable after approval of the Forest Plan, the Forest Supervisor will ensure that, subject to valid existing rights, all outstanding agreements and other instruments for occupancy and use of affected lands are consistent with the Forest Plan. Subsequent administrative activities affecting such lands, including budget proposals, shall be based on the Forest Plan. The Forest Supervisor may change proposed implementation schedules to reflect differences between proposed annual budgets and appropriated funds. Such scheduled changes shall not be considered a significant amendment to the Forest Plan. Changes significantly altering the long-term relationship between levels of multiple use goods and services compared to those projected under actual appropriations may be significant amendments.

The Forest Supervisor may amend the Forest Plan but must determine whether a proposed amendment would result in a significant change in the plan. If the change is determined to be significant, the Forest Supervisor shall follow the same procedure as that required for development and approval of a Forest Plan. If the change resulting from the amendment is determined not to be significant, the Forest Supervisor may implement the amendment following appropriate public notification and satisfactory completion of National Environmental Policy Act procedures.

APPEAL RIGHTS

This decision, except for wilderness and wild and scenic river recommendations, is subject to administrative review in accordance with the provisions of 36 CFR 211.18. Notice of appeal must be made in writing and submitted to Sotero Muniz, Regional Forester, Southwestern Region, USDA Forest Service, 517 Gold Avenue SW., Albuquerque, New Mexico 87102, within 45 days from the date of this decision. A statement of reasons to support the appeal and any request for oral presentation must be filed within the 45-day period for filing a notice of appeal.


SOTERO MUNIZ
Regional Forester

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Date